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The War Fifty Years Ago

Battle of Hanover Court House, Near Richmond—General McClellan Clears the Way For a Junction of His Army With the Army of General McDowell North of the Confederate Capital—Evacuation of Corinth, Miss., by the Confederates—First Cavalry Raid of the War. Desperate Fighting at Fair Oaks, Close to Richmond. The Confederates Attack McClellan's Left Wing, Driving It Two Miles—The Ground Is Recovered.

By Captain GEORGE L. KILMER, Late U. S. V.

LIEUTENANT J. B. WASHINGTON, U. S. A., was in the saddle and abroad early on the morning of May 31, 1862. Contrary to his intentions, in the course of the forenoon he rode into the Federal picket posts at Seven Pines, in front of Richmond. The mishap of the lieutenant, who belonged to the Mount Vernon Washingtons and served as an aid-de-camp on the staff of General Joseph E. Johnston, the Confederate commander, ended in a trip

to the stump lot where the timber had been cut to give range for the guns of a Federal battery. The Alabamians opened a brisk fire upon the New Yorkers and when it was briskly returned they threw themselves down behind the stumps and took picked shots. In a short time the New Yorkers retired to the shelter of a line of trenches in front of the guns.

About the time that the New Yorkers fell back the Confederate brigade led by General Gordon charged on the battery near Gordon's line, and Gordon ordered the Alabamians to rally on the



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LIEUTENANT J. B. WASHINGTON, U. S. A., WHOSE CAPTURE DISCLOSED THE PLANS OF HIS CHIEF, AND CAPTAIN G. W. CUSTER, U. S. A., OF GENERAL MCCLELLAN'S STAFF, PHOTOGRAPHED AT FAIR OAKS.

to Yankee prisons, but that was a trifle compared to the ill luck it caused for the flag he served.

From the picket posts it was but a short ride to the headquarters of General Keyes, the Federal commander on that line, and the aid was soon asked to explain himself to the enemy. He had ridden out from Richmond toward the hostile lines for the purpose of overtaking General Longstreet's division of Confederates and deliver to its commander fresh orders from his chief. Either Longstreet or himself had missed the proper road. Not that he gave his case away so easily, but his war outfit, combined with confusion over the capture, convinced Keyes that something new was on the cards across the lines. Keyes alarmed the outposts and reserves.

A Flood Dividing the Federal Army

A heavy rain of some days' duration had flooded the Chickahominy river, beyond which, northward, the main portion of McClellan's besieging army lay, and the Confederate leader, counting upon an advantage in the impassable waters, had marched out 60,000 men to overrun Keyes' corps and its reserve, amounting in all to about 30,000, while succor for them was out of reach. Owing to Lieutenant Washington's misadventure Longstreet did not get his proper orders for the attack, and other generals who were to take their cue from his movements were left in a fog. So the several columns in gray marched boldly forward and stirred up separate fights.

McClellan's left wing had crossed the Chickahominy to the Richmond side. Keyes' corps held the advance with rallying points at Fair Oaks and Seven Pines, about a mile apart and both about five miles from Richmond. The line did not run parallel to the river and was distant from the bridges over which the Federal troops had crossed from two to five miles. Scarcely had Keyes' men formed for battle between Fair Oaks and Seven Pines when the Confederate skirmishers appeared and opened the sensational battle of Fair Oaks, the first heavy combat at the gates of Richmond. Colonel John B. Gordon led the Confederate skirmishers at Fair Oaks, his own regiment of Alabamians, the sixth.

Battle Between Skirmishers.

In order to reach the battlefield by a short cut Gordon had marched his soldiers through the Oak swamp. After getting out of the mire, which was waist deep, they next ran into a briery thicket, and the experiences of the march brought them to a fighting temper which only a pitched battle could tone down. Two New York regiments, the Eighty-first and Eighty-fifth, stood

regimental colors. Mistaking the word of command, they faced about and started for the rear. When the mistake was pointed out, Gordon's men faced about again and charged pell-mell through the tangled abatis and over the intrenchments.

Mystified by the tactics of the southerners, the Federals again retreated, and in the eagerness of pursuit the Alabamians plunged blindly into a morass two or three feet deep. Gordon's men were soon caught in a snare. From a fresh Federal brigade the Third and Fifth Michigan were sent into a piece of woods on Gordon's flank. These two regiments, led by General Phil Kearny in person, were the vanguard of Kearny's division. At the first sound of battle Kearny had set out from the Federal reserve camps at the head of the first troops within call. These chances to be the Michigan men.

Phil Kearny at the Point of Danger

By their fierce and steady bush fighting they checked the fury of the enemy and gained time for Kearny's main column to get up. Kearny galloped back and forth, impatient over



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GENERAL PHIL KEARNY, U. S. A., A CONSPICUOUS FIGURE AT FAIR OAKS.

the delay caused by the flooded swamp roads. The leader of one belated regiment, riding in advance of his men, asked the general what point he should strike first. "Oh, anywhere—anywhere, colonel! You'll find lovely fighting along the whole line." There were both poetry and truth in that reply. The Fifth Michigan went in at double quick to within thirty feet of the enemy's rifles. This regiment mustered 300 men and lost 154 killed and wounded. Kearny's promptness in throwing in

regiment by regiment as his command reached the point of danger helped to save the army from disaster. Still fighting mad and looking for supports to come and help clear the woods of Federals, the Alabamians held on in the swamp for an hour. Gordon bore a charmed life, although his clothes were riddled with bullets, and finally his horse was shot under him. The lieutenant colonel, major and adjutant were cut down, and the ranks suffered appalling slaughter. Finding that no help came up to drive the Michigan men from the woods, Gordon ordered Captain Bell to face his flank company on a line perpendicular to the woods and keep the deadly fire down. Bell was mortally wounded the moment he changed front. So close were the Michigan men that he emptied his revolver among them as he lay dying.

Making Gory Battle History.

Finally word reached Gordon to retreat. When the casualties were counted it transpired that out of 622 Alabamians mustered for the fight 91 had been killed and 277 wounded, a battle loss never exceeded in a single fight.

While Gordon and his Alabamians struggled fiercely at Seven Pines a regiment of blue-coats made gory history at Fair Oaks. At that point the Federal line was crushed by the onslaught of the Palmetto regiment of South Carolina. The field was like that at Seven Pines woods, slashings and clearings for cannon. The Palmettos captured the ground and stood in their tracks to hold off two regiments of Pennsylvanians which came up much in the temper of Gordon's Alabamians at the other end of the field—that is, surprised, baffled and mad. In the lead marched the Sixty-first Pennsylvania, commanded by Colonel Oliver Hazard Rippey.

As the Pennsylvanians charged up at a double quick the Carolinians dropped to their knees. Keeping up a steady fire, the Federals cheered and advanced until within thirty paces of the foe. Firing from shoulder rests, the combatants kept up the murderous duel for thirty minutes. Colonel Rippey was killed, and the flag, torn to shreds, became his winding sheet. The lieutenant colonel, major and eleven other officers were killed or wounded and 263 men out of 574 who entered the fight.

Darkness closed in the night of May 31 with the situation on both sides of the lines very much as it was at Shiloh the first day. The Confederate leader, General Johnston, had been wounded and carried from the field before his plan of battle had been carried out. President Davis was on the ground giving battle orders in person. The Federals had been overwhelmed all along the line from Fair Oaks to Seven Pines and their batteries and intrenchments captured, but they had not been driven into the river.

Federal Reserves Brave the Flood.

Wounded by the sound of firing that the enemy had sprung an attack on the isolated left wing, McClellan's troops behind the Chickahominy were formed in line ready to cross and enter the fight. A single bridge out of a half dozen was passable, owing to the high water, and that only by wading. General E. V. Sumner crossed one division to the scene of fighting before dark. Other troops of the left wing, which had been in camp by the riverside some miles from the field, rushed forward to support the front line.

General Johnston had surprised the Army of the Potomac only to arouse it to the danger of its position astride of the river. Johnston had supposed that McDowell's Federal corps was marching down from the Rappahannock to a junction with McClellan on the James and he hoped to crush the army on his front before reinforcements could reach the enemy. But McDowell was at that moment a hundred miles from Richmond.

On the morning of June 1 there were twelve brigades of Confederates on the battlefield that had not fired a shot the previous day and eight brigades of Federals that had not been engaged. Before he was wounded Johnston gave orders that his regiments should sleep off their arms, ready to renew the fight early on June 1. All night May 31 McClellan's generals were preparing to recover the lost ground. Early in the morning they took up the fight, and at almost the first shock the Confederates retreated. There was no leader to direct the movements until the afternoon, when General Robert E. Lee was appointed by Davis to take the chief command. By that time the Confederates had been driven from the captured works, but held ground of their own choosing on the best roads from the river to Richmond.

Other Events of the Week.

About the middle of May, 1862, General Irvin McDowell, who lay at Fredericksburg with 40,000 Federal troops, was ordered to march direct toward Richmond. Near that city he was to unite his force with the Army of the Potomac, which McClellan was leading against Richmond. An obstacle to this union was a division of Confederates at Hanover, about twenty-five miles from Richmond. On the 27th General Fitz-John Porter's command attacked and dispersed the Confederates, thus clearing the way for McDowell's advance.

On the 30th of May the Confederate army under General Beauregard evacuated Corinth, Miss., which for one month had been besieged by Federals led by General H. W. Halleck. Beauregard was hard pressed by Halleck and abandoned his fortifications voluntarily so as to avoid useless battle. On the same day the first notable cavalry raid of the war took place at Boonville, not far from Corinth. It was led by Colonel W. L. Elliott.

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